

STATEMENT
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BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
SEPTEMBER 27, 2007

CONCERNING:

H.R. 1011 – Virginia Ridge and Valley Act of 2007

Thank you for the opportunity today to provide the Department's view on H.R. 1011, the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act of 2007. I am Joel Holtrop, Deputy Chief, National Forest System of the Forest Service.

H.R. 1011 would designate 27,817 acres in the Jefferson National Forest as new components of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Specifically, the bill would designate the following areas: Brush Mountain East Wilderness, Brush Mountain Wilderness, Raccoon Branch Wilderness, Stone Mountain Wilderness, Hunting Camp Creek Wilderness, and Garden Mountain Wilderness. H.R. 1011 would also designate 11,344 acres as additions to existing wilderness areas namely, Mountain Lake Wilderness, Lewis Fork Wilderness, Little Wilson Creek Wilderness, Shawvers Run Wilderness, Peters Mountain Wilderness, and Kimberling Creek Wilderness.

H.R. 1011 would designate 3,226 acres in the Jefferson National Forest as the "Lynn Camp Creek Wilderness Study Area." The bill also would designate 349 acres depicted on the map as the "Kimberling Creek Additions and Potential Wilderness Area" as a potential wilderness area for eventual incorporation in the Kimberling Creek Wilderness. The bill would set forth requirements regarding ecological restoration within this area and would provide for the designation of the area as a wilderness within five years.

In addition, the bill would designate 11,583 acres of the Seng Mountain and Bear Creek areas as national scenic areas for purposes of ensuring the protection and preservation of scenic quality, water quality, natural characteristics, and water resources; protecting wildlife and fish habitat; protecting areas that may develop characteristics of old-growth forests; and providing a variety of recreation opportunities.

Finally the bill would direct the Secretary of Agriculture to develop a management plan for the designated national scenic areas. The Secretary also would be required to develop a trail plan for hiking and equestrian trails on lands designated as wilderness by this Act

and to develop a plan for non-motorized recreation trails within the Seng Mountain and Bear Creek National Scenic Areas. The bill also would direct the Secretary to develop a sustainable non-motorized trail in Smyth County, Virginia.

We recognize and commend the delegation and the Committee for its collaborative approach and local involvement that has contributed to the development of this bill. The Department supports several of the designations included in the bill but we object to other designations and to mandatory planning and construction requirements. The Department would like to work with the Committee to offer suggestions which we think will improve H.R. 1011.

Wilderness Proposals

During the development or revision of a forest land and resource management plan (LRMP), a national forest conducts an evaluation of potential wilderness or wilderness study areas that satisfies the definition of wilderness found in section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964. On National Forest System (NFS) lands in the Eastern United States (east of the 100th meridian) the criteria for evaluating potential wilderness recognizes that much, if not all of the land, shows signs of human activity and modification. The Record of Decision for the revised Jefferson National Forest LRMP, signed on January 15, 2004, was developed over an 11-year period with extensive public involvement. It contains recommendations for 25,200 acres of wilderness study areas, including new wilderness study areas and additions to existing areas designated as wilderness.

The Department supports the provisions in H.R. 1011 that would designate new components of the NWPS that are consistent with the Jefferson National Forest LRMP recommendations for wilderness study. These areas are the proposed Garden Mountain, Hunting Creek Camp, and Stone Mountain Wilderness areas.

The Department supports the designation of additions to existing wilderness areas for the following areas: Kimberling Creek A and B Additions, Lewis Fork Addition, Little Wilson Creek Addition, Mountain Lake A and C Additions, Peters Mountain Addition, and Shawvers Run A Addition.

The Department does not oppose the designation of the "Lynn Camp Creek Wilderness Study Area," the Mountain Lake B Addition, and Shawvers Run Additions B and C areas. However, we have concerns about the suitability of the Lynn Camp Creek Wilderness Study Area as a component of the NWPS due to its small size, configuration, and manageability (due to outstanding mineral rights). The Department is willing to work with the committee to look at other options for protection of this area. We also have concerns about the suitability of the Mountain Lake B Addition and the Shawvers Run Additions B and C as components of the NWPS due to their size and configuration. An additional concern with the Mountain Lake Addition B is that it contains a 59-acre

private inholding which could require associated road access in the future if the parcel is developed.

The Department does not support the designation as “potential wilderness” for the 349-acre portion of the Kimberling Creek area. The designation “Potential Wilderness” is not a designation referenced in the Wilderness Act of 1964. A subsequent designation of wilderness following a fixed time period and associated compulsory changes in conditions can serve to limit the Secretary’s discretion in the allocation of scarce resources and other management actions associated with the administration of the NFS and the NWPS. We use the term, potential wilderness, in our wilderness evaluation process under our LRMP efforts to evaluate areas as potential additions to the NWPS. The Kimberling Creek addition was recently acquired as NFS land and in its current condition does not contain the basic natural characteristics that make it suitable for wilderness due to an extensive road network. We would recommend that the Committee consider allowing the Secretary to continue the current management prescription for this area which is Dispersed Recreation-Unsuitable. This management emphasis provides for a variety of dispersed recreation uses with minimal vegetation management and would allow use of motorized and mechanized equipment for needed road and trail rehabilitation work. We plan to develop rehabilitation plans and implement these plans within the next 5 to 10 years. While this area was not recommended as a potential wilderness area in the LRMP, future wilderness designation of this area could be reevaluated after restoration activities occur.

The Department does not support wilderness designation for the Brush Mountain and Brush Mountain East areas. These areas lie on the north side of Brush Mountain and are separated by a 345 kilovolt powerline corridor. They were not recommended for wilderness study in LRMP. They contain fire-dependent forest habitat which make up approximately 50 percent of these two areas. Additionally, the areas are largely surrounded by private lands. Wildland urban interface (subdivisions and housing developments) exists on the north and south boundaries. If designated as wilderness, our ability to utilize prescribed fire for the maintenance of southern yellow pine forest communities and to conduct hazardous fuels reduction projects would be hampered in these interface areas. Our ability to use prescribed fire is compromised when we cannot mechanically construct firelines to better control fire management activities. Additionally, the narrow width of, and the bisecting powerline corridor within these areas detract from their naturalness and offer few opportunities for solitude. We have also recently identified a need for a small boundary change in the proposed wilderness area along the northwest side of Brush Mountain East. An electric distribution line is located along Craig Creek and the current boundary includes some of the line within the proposed wilderness. If the Committee proceeds with wilderness designation, we would like to work with the Committee to adjust the boundary to exclude this existing line.

The Department could support the designation of the Raccoon Branch area as a wilderness area if agreements are reached in resolving trail maintenance issues in the area and if the requirement contained in section 5(d) of the bill for a sustainable trail is amended to provide more flexibility for any future alternative trail locations. Nearly six

miles of the Virginia Highlands Horse Trail (VHHT) and the Dickey Knob Trail traverse this area. These trails are heavily used by both equestrians and mountain bikers. Currently only four of the six miles of the VHHT in the Raccoon Branch area are open to mountain bike use due to the steep nature of the trail where it enters the west end of Raccoon Branch. Wilderness designation would eliminate mountain bike use within the area. While equestrian use is compatible with wilderness designation, heavy use and ground conditions along the VHHT necessitate extensive maintenance to maintain the integrity of the trail and protect watershed and other resources values. To maintain the trail to the standards that are needed without mechanized or motorized equipment will require cooperative agreements and commitments from user groups to help in maintenance to protect the resources and to provide for continued equestrian use of the trail. We would like to work with the Committee to adjust the boundary as now proposed in the bill. The adjustment would exclude the section of VHHT from the western boundary to its intersection with Hickory Ridge Trail #4516 which we believe would alleviate much of the concern with maintaining the trail for equestrian use.

National Scenic Area Proposals

Section 4 of H.R. 1011 would establish Seng Mountain and Bear Creek National Scenic Areas (NSAs). In testimony to the House Natural Resources Committee in May, the Department expressed concerns regarding the proposed Bear Creek NSA over the limitations on our ability to improve black bear habitat and to provide opportunities for hunting as a result of this designation and mandated closure of a Forest Service development road. The Department indicated it could support the Bear Creek NSA designation if allowances were made for seasonal motorized use of Forest Development Road #6261 during hunting season. Subsequently, the Natural Resources Committee amended H.R. 1011 to provide that the road will be open for motorized use during bear and deer hunting seasons. The Department appreciates the action by the Natural Resources Committee relative to the road.

Last month, the President signed Executive Order (E.O.) No. 13443, "Facilitation of Hunting Heritage and Wildlife Conservation." This E.O. requires Federal land management agencies to "...Manage wildlife and wildlife habitats on public lands in a manner that expands and enhances hunting opportunities...". Forest Service direction on compliance with the E.O. is being developed. Portions of both the Seng Mountain and Bear Creek NSAs are managed under the LRMP to manage black bear habitat. We would like to work with the Committee on language that would allow a low level of habitat management for black bear that would be consistent with the E.O. and compatible with the purposes for which the scenic areas are being established.

The proposed Seng Mountain NSA is within the congressionally designated Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (NRA). The Mount Rogers NRA is managed to provide public outdoor recreation benefits and the continued use by a diversity of recreation uses. The Seng Mountain area contains a motorized trail, the Barton Gap Trail #4624. Motorized use of the trail would be prohibited under H.R. 1011. The Barton Gap

Trail is one of only five designated motorcycle trails on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests and is an important part of the diversity of recreation opportunities that we provide the visitors that use the Forest and the Mount Rogers NRA. The Department would like to work with the Committee to resolve any confusion resulting from the overlapping designations for the Seng Mountain area. The Department recommends that the overlapping designation be clarified and continued motorized use on the Barton Gap Trail be allowed.

Trail Development Plans

H.R. 1011 would require the Secretary to establish a trail plan to develop hiking and equestrian trails on lands designated as wilderness by this bill. The designated lands would be administered in accordance with the Wilderness Act. The Forest Service already addresses trail management and planning standards within the LRMP planning process. The Department considers the requirement to develop additional trail plans to be unnecessary.

H.R. 1011 also would require the Secretary to develop a sustainable trail to provide a continuous connection for non-motorized travel between State Route (SR) 650 and Forest Development Road 4018. This trail would be along SR 16. We believe that it would be costly and difficult to provide a trail in this general location that would be safe for both equestrians and mountain bikers. The existing gravel road (SR 650) is winding and narrow and contains several blind curves. It receives high local use and is the main access road for campers and recreational vehicles to enter Hurricane Campground. Further, a potential connector trail for horses and bikes from SR 650 along the route of the old Marion-Rye Valley rail bed would require crossing SR 16, a 55-mph State highway that receives heavy commercial use, in a location with poor sight distance. Trail construction along the stream would be unlikely to meet our Forest standards for riparian protection. The bill language that specifies the terminus of the connector route limits our ability to locate and construct a trail that will meet Forest Service standards for safety and in a manner that is environmentally appropriate. We would like to work with the Committee on language that would allow us to construct trail facilities with adequate consideration for alternatives, priorities, and costs.

This concludes my statement, I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.